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PREPARATIONS FOR THE SEVENTH SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Addendum

Activities of the United Nations Environment Programme regarding tourism

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

With more than 260 million employees and annual capital project investments of more than $800 billion, the tourism industry accounts for 10.7 per cent of the world gross domestic product (GDP) and ranks as one of the world's largest industries. While contributing to social and economic development, tourism can also have serious negative environmental impacts, resulting from resource consumption, pollution and wastes generated, thereby destroying the sound environment on which the tourism industry depends, to thrive and grow. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has already developed a programme, which needs to be further refined and strengthened, to address those issues in cooperation with other partners and, in particular, with the World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

* UNEP/GC.20/1.

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Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

1. Note with appreciation the initiatives taken thus far by UNEP in developing a work programme on sustainable tourism, in cooperation with industry associations and other international organizations, and in particular, the World Tourism Organization and UNESCO;

2. Request UNEP to organize the consultation to finalize the principles for sustainable tourism on the basis of the draft attached in annex, and to urge Governments to support this initiative;

3. Request UNEP, in association with relevant partners, to continue its work on voluntary initiatives and codes in the tourism sector;

4. Request UNEP to transmit this decision as a contribution to the Commission on Sustainable Development at its seventh session.

I. OVERVIEW

A. Role of tourism in economic development

1. Comprising of diverse groups of business and industry, including air and cruise companies, tour operators, travel agents, hotels, restaurants and sports and leisure industries, tourism ranks alongside such sectors as construction and petrochemicals as one of the world's largest industries. In 1970, there were 160 million international tourists, and 613 million in 1997. Tourism is expected to grow at a rate of around 4.5 per cent during the coming years. The domestic tourism sector, estimated to be about 10 times larger than international tourism, is also growing. In addition, tourism is expanding into remote and sensitive areas, including new mountain areas and Antarctica. For many countries, in particular in the developing world, tourism is a major contributor to the gross national product (GNP).

B. Environmental impact of tourism

2. Given its scale and global extent, it is obvious that tourism has serious environmental impacts. Prominent among these are the following:

(a) Tourism activities generate pollution and wastes: tourists produce sewage and solid waste and they often leave litter. Planes, buses and cars make noise and pollute the air. Marine waters and coastal areas are under particular threat from pollution caused by land-based hotels and marinas, and waste and litter from marine sports. For example, in 1995, it was estimated that cruise ships in the Caribbean alone produced more than 70,000 tons of waste per year;

(b) Tourism puts pressure on natural resources: overuse of critical freshwater resources for swimming pools and golf courses strains a resource which is often in short supply. Coral reefs have been damaged in many areas. Urbanization and road and airport building lead to land degradation, soil erosion and the deterioration of scenery;

(c) Tourism is a threat to wildlife and habitats with associated loss of biodiversity: trade and hunting are placing increased pressure on endangered species; extra demand for firewood is leading to the loss of forest cover and increasing the risk of forest fires. The development of new berths for cruise ships can destroy valuable coastal habitats and their massive anchors and chains have gouged large chasms 3-10 metres deep in parts of the Caribbean. The current boom in ecotourism is threatening the world's most ecologically fragile areas and world heritage sites;

(d) Tourism also means disturbance to local ways of life and to local social structures. As a result, it can adversely affect traditional practices that contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

3. A number of regions, such as the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and the Himalayas, are already badly affected by tourism. This is increasingly being recognized by Governments: thus, Jamaica's 1995-1996 state-of-the-environment report notes: "Although coastal resources augment tourism earnings, tourism-related activities often have severe environmental impacts, which could reduce Jamaica's ability to sustain its attraction as a tourist destination". The report concludes: "Given the importance of the environment to the tourism industry, its long-term protection must become a priority". It is therefore clear that it makes good business sense for the tourism industry to operate in an environmentally sound manner.

C. Environmental deterioration: a threat for the tourism industry

4. Environmental deterioration threatens the viability of the tourism industry. Some of the threats arise from the activities of other economic sectors, while some arise directly or indirectly from activities associated with tourism itself.

5. Among major environmental threats to tourism are the following:

(a) Global warming, which is an important threat to tourism in coastal areas and small island developing States; it also poses a threat to ski resorts, especially those at low and medium altitude which have less reliable snow conditions and shorter periods of snow cover, which reduce the length of the ski season;

(b) Loss of biodiversity and loss of landscape linked to tourism activities, which are undermining the attractiveness of a number of tourism destinations;

(c) Coastal water pollution and lack of freshwater, such as algal blooms in the Adriatic during 1989, resulting from the high level of organic pollution from various sources, led to a temporary bathing ban severely affecting tourism;

(d) Local air pollution linked to urban congestion, which can discourage tourists from visiting some destinations, or due to other causes, such as the haze from forest fires in south-east Asia during 1997, which also led tourists to avoid destinations in the affected area.

D. Contribution of tourism to environmental conservation

6. While tourism can cause the environment to deteriorate, it also leads to sustainable development, as it can bring social and economic benefits and preserve the environment. Tourism offers a real alternative to other more obviously detrimental forms of development and provides a powerful economic argument for protecting the environment. The tourism industry can contribute to the conservation of areas that are assets for their development: parks, protected areas and cultural and natural sites, through financial contributions, the provision of environmental infrastructure and improved management. Financial contributions are being made for a limited number of initiatives by the tourism industry and this trend should be further developed. Tourism also promotes awareness by the local population of the financial value of natural and cultural sites and makes them proud of this heritage and allies for its conservation.

7. In more general terms, the involvement of local communities in tourism development and operation appears to be an important condition for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

II. CHALLENGES AND GAPS

8. The relationship between tourism - whether this so-called "ecotourism" or mass tourism - and the environment, as can be seen from the above analysis, is highly complex, involving many activities which can have both beneficial or adverse effects, depending on the way they are planned and managed. In the same way that tourism itself is the outcome of interactions between a wide set of stakeholders - Governments at national and local level, tourists and other economic sectors providing goods and services to tourism, as well as the tourism industry itself - management and mitigation of the adverse effects of tourism and the maximization of its benefits depend on actions by and interactions between all stakeholders involved in tourism.

9. All those stakeholders have a shared responsibility to make tourism sustainable. Already a number of steps have been taken, but huge challenges remain.

A. Role of Governments

10. Governments have taken a number of initiatives, in all parts of the world, to develop national strategies or master plans for the sustainable development of tourism, as well as appropriate regulatory mechanisms and tools, such as the conduct of environmental impact assessments and the development of building regulations and of environmental standards for tourism. They have created terrestrial and marine protected areas. Elements of guidance for sustainable tourism have been developed by various groups and organizations. A number of countries have adopted user-fee schemes to support the preservation of the environment. For example, in 1992, the Bonaire Marine Park in the Netherlands Antilles was one of the first protected marine areas in the Caribbean to become entirely self-financing through the levying of admission fees on scuba divers. Fees support the continuous and active management of the park's coral reef, sea grass and mangrove ecosystems, as well as educational activities and orientation

sessions for divers. Seychelles is introducing a $90 tax for visitors to the country, the revenue from which will be used to preserve the environment and improve tourism facilities. In return, travellers will receive a card giving access to national parks, botanical gardens and national heritage sites on all the islands in the Seychelles.

11. The remaining challenges to national and local governments are immense, however. There is a need for the further development and implementation of legislative and policy frameworks, including the most appropriate mix of regulatory tools, economic instruments, management tools and support measures. Environmental considerations are not sufficiently integrated in the planning, siting and design of tourism facilities and infrastructures. Governments have to raise the awareness of all stakeholders, build capacity and promote effective action for sustainable tourism. This includes monitoring the environment, to identify, control and mitigate the adverse effects that may arise from tourism activities.

12. Governments should promote the use of principles for the implementation of sustainable tourism. To that end, a proposed draft of such principles is provided in the annex to the present report. The purpose of the principles is to consolidate the existing guidelines into a coherent set of key principles to guide the different stakeholders in the development and implementation of sustainable tourism. These draft principles are designed:

(a) To provide a coherent framework for more specific guidelines to be prepared by the various conventions, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the regional seas action plans and other international agreements, that are already or will in the future be addressing tourism issues;

(b) To help Governments and intergovernmental, private-sector and other organizations in applying the general concept of sustainable tourism in practice and in minimizing the environmental impacts of tourism.

B. Role of the private sector

13. The tourism industry has already developed a number of voluntary initiatives to address environmental issues. Thus, thanks to the efforts of such industry associations as the International Hotel and Restaurant Association, the International Hotel Environment Initiative of the Prince of Wales Business Leaders' Forum and the World Travel and Tourism Council, in association with UNEP, managers of hotels and tourism facilities have improved their overall environmental performance by using cleaner production approaches and environmental management tools. Ecolabelling schemes have been developed as a means to promote the environmental efforts of companies. Voluntary initiatives and codes of conduct have been adopted.

14. Major challenges remain, however. Environmental management tools should be more widely used in the tourism industry and environmental performance publicly documented in sustainability reports; environmentally sound technologies, responding to the specific needs of the tourism sector, should be developed; adequate environmental impact assessment studies should be carried out for the siting and design of tourism facilities; tour operators and local tourism boards should raise the awareness of their

clients of the environmental and social implications of their holidays and their behaviour; and a better dialogue should be developed with the local communities in travel destinations.

C. Role of other stakeholders

15. Many non-governmental organizations have already made significant steps in modifying consumers' preferences for various tourism destinations and their behaviour, they have publicized sensitive issues and highlighted problematic areas, thus influencing decisions. They have also enhanced environmental awareness and raised educational levels in this area with very positive results. One example that may be cited here is the Blue Flag campaign, conducted by the Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe, which contributed to the improvement in the quality of European beaches and marinas.

16. Non-governmental organizations could, however, be more fully involved in the design and implementation of tourism policies and strategies and related voluntary initiatives of the tourism industry. They should develop their role in raising awareness and promoting educational activities for sustainable tourism, with a view, in particular, to changing attitudes, behaviour and consumption patterns on both the demand and supply sides.

III. UNEP ACTIVITIES RELATED TO TOURISM

17. Within UNEP, the following strategy was adopted in cooperation with the Mediterranean Action Plan, the Caribbean Action Plan and other relevant agreements and conventions, to develop a coherent tourism programme over the last six years:

(a) Promotion of the use of environmentally-sound practices in Government and industry;

(b) Focus on the development and management of tourism in sensitive areas, such as national parks and protected areas and coastal zones;

(c) Support for the implementation of UNEP agreements and conventions in the areas of regional seas, biological diversity, and the ozone layer;

(d) Joining forces with other international organizations in the United Nations system, such as UNESCO and the World Tourism Organization, with such non-governmental organizations as the Ecotourism Society, the Federation of Environmental Education in Europe, and business and industry organizations such as the International Hotel and Restaurants Association, the International Hotels Environment Initiative and the World Travel and Tourism Council.

18. The corresponding activities and partnerships have resulted in a number of specific publications aiming at sharing information on best practices in the tourism industry and in the management of sensitive areas. A list of such publications may be found in annex II to the present report. UNEP, always working in cooperation with other partners, has also organized a number of awareness-raising and capacity-building workshops.

19. In October 1998, UNEP and the World Tourism Organization jointly organized an international conference on sustainable tourism in small island developing States and other islands, in Lanzarote, Canary Islands, Spain, in liaison with the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). In addition to providing a platform for information-sharing, the conference adopted a set of recommendations, distributed separately, addressed to Governments and relevant regional and international governmental organizations. UNEP and WTO are requested to continue working jointly to disseminate case studies of best practices for sustainable tourism in small island developing States, and to convene regular meetings to continue sharing information and to discuss issues of particular relevance for tourism in small island developing States.

IV. PROPOSED UNEP ACTION

20. The issue of the interface between tourism and the environment has only recently come to the attention of the international community. The resulting challenges for UNEP, in cooperation with other intergovernmental organizations and other partners, to catalyse action and to ensure that environmental considerations are fully integrated in tourism development, are numerous. They include the following:

(a) Sharing information and building capacity on policies, management tools and best practices for environmentally sound tourism development;

(b) Encouraging the private sector to develop and apply guidelines and codes of conduct for sustainable tourism, as well as the publication of environmental reports;

(c) Building consensus on environmental economic instruments and incentives aimed at ensuring that tourism activities meet the needs of nature and biological diversity conservation, including mobilizing funding from tourism.

21. The UNEP programme of work for 2000-2001, as contained in document UNEP/GC.20/22, addresses the above gaps and should enable UNEP, in association with other partners both within and outside the United Nations system, to assist Governments and industry to promote sustainable tourism.

Annex I

DRAFT PRINCIPLES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

The following principles are set out with a view to ensuring the integration of environmental consideration in the wider economic and social aspects of tourism development. They aim at protecting the quality of the human and natural environment and the resources on which tourism depends and at ensuring that tourism operates within natural capacities for the regeneration and future productivity of natural resources, so as to allow overall equitable economic and social growth.

1. Integration of tourism into overall policy for sustainable development

(a) National strategies: To ensure that tourism is balanced with broader economic, social and environmental objectives at national and local levels by setting out a national tourism strategy that is based on knowledge of environmental and biodiversity resources and is integrated with national and regional sustainable development plans.

(b) Interagency coordination and cooperation: To improve the management and development of tourism by promoting coordination and cooperation between and among the different agencies, authorities and organizations concerned at all levels and by ensuring that their areas of jurisdiction and responsibilities are clearly defined and complement one another.

(c) Integrated management: To coordinate the allocation of land uses and to regulate inappropriate activities that damage ecosystems, by strengthening or developing integrated policies and management systems covering all activities, including integrated coastal zone management.

(d) Reconciling conflicting resource uses: To identify and resolve potential or actual conflicts between tourism and other activities over resource use at an early stage, by involving all relevant stakeholders in the development of sound management plans and providing the organization, facilities and enforcement capacity required for the effective implementation of those management plans.

2. Development of sustainable tourism

(a) Planning for development and land-use at the sub-national level: To conserve the environment, maintain the quality of the visitor experience and provide benefits for local communities by ensuring that tourism planning is undertaken as part of overall development plans for any area.

(b) Environmental impact assessment: To anticipate environmental impacts by undertaking comprehensive environmental impact assessment for all tourism development programmes and by taking into account cumulative effects from multiple development activities of all types.

(c) Planning measures: To ensure that tourism development remains within national and local plans both for tourism and for other types of activity by implementing effective carrying capacity programmes, planning controls and management.

(d) Legislative framework: To support the implementation of sustainable tourism through an effective legislative framework that establishes standards for land-use in tourism development, tourism facilities, tourism management and investment in tourism.

(e) Environmental standards: To protect the environment by setting clear ambient environmental quality standards, along with targets for reducing pollution from all sectors, including tourism, to achieve these standards, and by preventing development in areas where it would be inappropriate.

(f) Regional standards: To ensure that tourism and the environment are mutually supportive at a regional level through cooperation and coordination between States and to establish common approaches to incentives, environmental policies, and integrated tourism development planning.

3. Management of tourism

(a) Initiatives by industry: To ensure long-term commitments and improvements, with a view to developing and promoting sustainable tourism, through partnerships and voluntary initiatives by all sectors and stakeholders, including initiatives to give local communities a share in the ownership and benefits of tourism.

(b) Monitoring: To ensure the consistent monitoring and review of tourism activities, with a view to detecting problems at an early stage and to facilitating action to avert more serious damage.

(c) Technology: To minimize resource use and the generation of pollution and wastes by using and promoting environmentally sound technologies for tourism and associated infrastructure.

(d) Compliance mechanisms: To ensure compliance with development plans, planning conditions, standards and targets for sustainable tourism by providing incentives, by monitoring compliance and by enforcement activities where necessary.

4. Conditions for success

(a) Involvement of stakeholders: To increase the long-term success of tourism projects by involving all primary stakeholders, including the local community, the tourism industry and the Government, in the development and implementation of tourism plans.

(b) Information exchange: To raise awareness of sustainable tourism and its implementation by promoting the exchange of information between Governments and all stakeholders on best practice for sustainable tourism and through the establishment of networks for dialogue on implementation of the present Principles.

(c) Capacity-building: To ensure the effective implementation of sustainable tourism, and of the present Principles, through capacity-building programmes to develop and strengthen human resources and institutional capacities in government at national and local levels, and among local communities.

All stakeholders, national and local governments, business and industry, international and non-governmental organizations, have important roles to play in implementing the present Principles.

Annex II

UNEP PUBLICATIONS IN THE FIELD OF TOURISM

Awards for Improving the Coastal Environment: The Example of the Blue Flag, joint publication with the World Tourism Organization and the Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe (1996)

Ecolabels in the Tourism Industry (1998)

Ecotourism in the Wider Caribbean Region: An Assessment (1994)

Environmental Action Pack for Hotels: Practical steps to Benefit Your Business and the Environment, joint publication with the International Hotels Association and the International Hotels Environment Initiative (1995)

Environmental Codes of Conduct for Tourism (1995)

Environmental Good Practice in Hotels, case studies from the International Hotel and Restaurant Association Annual Environmental Award, joint publication with the International Hotel and Restaurant Association (1997)

Guidelines: Development of National Parks and Protected Areas for Tourism, joint publication with the World Tourism Organization (1992)

How the Hotel and Tourism Industry Can Protect the Ozone Layer, Guidebook GB4 of the OzonAction Programme (1998)

Industry and Environment, review, vol. 15, issues 3 and 4: Sustainable tourism development (1992)

Managing Tourism in Natural World Heritage Sites, joint publication with the UNESCO World Heritage Centre (1993)

Our Planet, bimonthly magazine

Tourism Focus, series of newsletters (eight issues since 1996)

Tourisme et environnement en Méditerranée (1995)